

No. 4

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ALL-SPORTS LIBRARY



JACK LIGHTFOOT'S ATHLETIC TOURNAMENT

OR BREAKING THE RECORD QUARTER-MILE DASH



BY MAURICE STEVENS

There was a roar from the frenzied crowd when Lightfoot, by a magnificent burst of speed, forged to the front, and flashed over the line a scant yard to the good.

Publishers' Note. "Teach the American boy how to become an athlete, and lay the foundation for a Constitution greater than that of the United States."—Wise sayings from "Tip Top." There has never been a time when the boys of this great country took so keen an interest in all manly and health-giving sports as they do to-day. As proof of this witness the record-breaking throngs that attend college struggles on the gridiron, as well as athletic and baseball games, and other tests of endurance and skill. In a multitude of other channels this love for the "life strenuous" is making itself manifest, so that, as a nation, we are rapidly forging to the front as seekers of honest sport. Recognizing this "handwriting on the wall," we have concluded that the time has arrived to give this vast army of young enthusiasts a publication devoted exclusively to invigorating out-door life. We feel we are justified in anticipating a warm response from our sturdy American boys, who are sure to revel in the stirring phases of sport and adventure, through which our characters pass from week to week.

ALL-SPORTS LIBRARY

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No. 4.

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JACK LIGHTFOOT'S ATHLETIC TOURNAMENT;

OR,

Breaking the Record Quarter-mile Dash.

By MAURICE STEVENS.

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P. O. BOX 661
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CHARACTERS IN THIS STORY.

Jack Lightfoot, the best all-round athlete in Cranford or vicinity, a lad clear of eye, clean of speech, and, after he had conquered a few of his faults, possessed of a faculty for *doing things* while others were talking, that by degrees caused him to be looked upon as the natural leader in all the sports Young America delights in—a boy who in learning to conquer himself put the power into his hands to wrest victory from others.

Tom Lightfoot, Jack's cousin, and sometimes his rival; though their striving for the mastery was always of the friendly, generous kind. Tom was called the "Book-Worm" by his fellows, on account of his love for studying such secrets of nature as practical observers have discovered and published; so that he possessed a fund of general knowledge calculated to prove useful when his wandering spirit took him abroad into strange lands.

Ned Skeen, of impulsive, nervous temperament, one of those who followed the newcomer, Birkett, being dazzled by the dash of his manner, and the free way in which he flung money around.

Lafe Lampton, a big, hulking chap, with an ever present craving for something to eat. Lafe always had his appetite along, and proved a staunch friend of our hero through thick and thin.

Jerry Mulligan, a broth of an Irish boy, fond of fair play.

Kennedy, a constable of Cranford.

Kate Strawn and **Nellie Conner**, some of the girls at Cranford.

Phil Kirtland, captain of the Academy Team, and Jack's rival.

Nat Kimball, an undersized fellow, whose hobby was the study of *jin-jitsu*, and who had a dread of germs.

Saul Messenger, **Jim Bright** and **Bob Pomeroy**, members of Jack's athletic team.

Nate Silingsby and **Brodie Strawn**, of the academy crowd.

Wilson Crane, **Orson Oxx**, **Nick Flint**, **Bat Arnold** and **Jube Marlin**, who formed the "gang," and believed in many things that boys had better leave severely alone.

CHAPTER I.

WILSON CRANE.

When Wilson Crane came out of his father's office, with something bulging his coat pocket, the day was so warm that his big coat felt uncomfortable.

"Gee! this gives me spring fever!"

Ordinarily it did not take much to give Wilson Crane "spring fever."

But the day was really unusually warm for the season.

The snow had not been gone long, and the fickle climate might be expected to jump back into the arms of winter at any time, yet the sky was blue, the lake dimpled as if glad to be released from the icy fetters of winter, and somewhere Wilson heard a bird singing.

He looked craftily up and down the street.

"If anyone happens to mention to father that they saw me at the office, why, that will be all right! I've a right to go into the office, haven't I? Yet I thought it was locked. I guess he forgot that it wasn't."

Having satisfied himself that no one was giving him any attention he walked on up the street.

Reaching the confines of the town of Cranford, he was about to turn into a road leading into the country, when he saw some boys on the cinder path of the athletic field.

"It will be just as well not to have them see which way I go!" he muttered, and drew back.

Then he struck across lots, and entering another road hurried on.

From the crest of a rise, where a big rock and a tree standing close together shielded him from view, he looked back on the athletic field.

"Jack Lightfoot thinks he's great stuff!" he muttered.

The athletic field was inside the old fair grounds.

Here were accommodations for spectators, judges of events, and everything else that was really needed.

The old cinder track, that had witnessed numerous interesting events, for Cranford possessed many lovers of athletic sports, had been overhauled by boys from the crack clubs of the high school and the Cranford Academy, and was now in pretty good shape.

Lightfoot and his friends from the high school were out on the cinder path, practicing for the tournament that was to be held shortly.

Wilson Crane could see the neat suits which the members of the tournament team wore, even from where he stood; and he knew which boy was Jack Lightfoot, even though he was too far off to see Jack's face.

There were many other young people gathered there watching the practice work and the sprinting, and some of these were girls, as Wilson saw.

He thrust his long nose into the air contemptuously.

Wilson Crane was suffering from a case of unappreciated talents.

He was a student at the Cranford Academy, the sweet private school of Cranford, conducted by Prof. Sander-son.

Phil Kirtland was the leader of the academy athletic boys, and as such, to him had fallen the duty of selecting those boys whom he thought would have a chance of defeating the high-school fellows in the contests that were to come.

Wilson believed that he was a runner; a veritable sprinter, in truth.

He was as long-legged in appearance as the bird whose name he bore. His legs were long, his arms were long, his neck was long, and on the end of his neck was set a birdlike head, with the long nose and retreating chin, giving it the profile of a hawk. Wilson Crane's face was almost a caricature, though he was blissfully ignorant of the fact.

"Kirtland wants to rake all the plums himself; that's what's the matter with him. I can beat him running any day, and he knows it, too. I could beat Lightfoot too, if Kirt would give me a chance to try it. But he wants to go against Lightfoot himself. Well, I hope he'll be defeated, even if he is from the academy."

Having aired his grievances to the tree and the rock, Wilson Crane went on, shuffling along the country road, until he came to a path that took him across the field.

Here, behind the screen of some tall pines, sat a big half-tumbled-down barn. There had been a house but it had either fallen down and disappeared in that way, or had been hauled away.

Some boys were standing and sitting about in the warm sunshine in front of the barn.

"Hello!" they said, rising when they saw him. "Go the cards?"

"You bet!" said Wilson, winking one of his big eyes. "And I've got something else, too."

Then he drew out the article that had bulged the pocket of his big coat and held it up.

It was a bottle of whisky.

CHAPTER II.

"THE GANG."

The boys who had greeted him, Wilson Crane knew as "The Gang."

It is perhaps true that they were not really bad fellows at heart. They merely thought it was manly to be "wild," and "fast," to cut loose from parental control, defy school authorities, and conduct themselves as they fancied they would like to do if they were full-grown men.

Wilson Crane was one of them, but he was not their leader; he had not sufficient strength of character for that.

To him they were "jolly good fellows," fond of a lark, a game of cards, and cigarettes and whisky.

He had a feeling that in consorting with them he was hurrying himself into manhood.

The real leader was Nicholas Flint, who had a dark face, high cheek bones, and staring black eyes like those of an Apache.

Another member was Orson Oxx, who was nearly as round as a ball and as strong almost as the animal he seemed to be appropriately named for.

Orson boasted that his roundness and his strength came from drinking beer. But this wasn't true. Orson had no money to spend on beer, and he disliked work so much that he earned little.

The other members of "The Gang" were Bat Arnold—bullet-headed Bat—who is already known to the readers of these stories, for he was on Phil Kirtland's hockey team and was one of the academy students; and Yubal, or Jube, Marlin, a wide-mouthed Yankee, forever in a good humor.

Flint and Bat Arnold were the really "bad" boys of this interesting bunch of youngsters, if any were; the others merely followed them, when anything very outrageous was contemplated or carried out.

"That's good!" said Flint, his staring black eyes snapping, when he saw the bottle of whisky.

"By hemlock, haow dew yeou know it is?" cried Jube Marlin. "Yeou haven't tasted it yit."

"I know good whisky when I see it," Flint declared, with an air of authority, for in his opinion the ability to tell good whisky was the distinguishing mark of a man of the world, and such he longed to be.

He reached out his hand to take the bottle.

"Come into the barn first," said Wilson. "You'll find it's good, all right. I swiped it from the old man's office, and he never keeps anything but the best there is, for his patients."

"Gad! I'd like to be one of his patients a little while!" said Bat Arnold.

"You may be, one of these days, if you go up too hard against Jack Lightfoot," Wilson retorted. "Come on into the barn. Somebody might see us hanging round out here."

When they had entered the barn and climbed up into the loft, which was half-filled with hay, Wilson produced from another pocket a deck of cards.

Nicholas Flint took the bottle of whisky from Crane's hands, tossed back his head, swallowed a little of the fiery contents, and coughed, though he tried to keep from doing that, as he passed the bottle back.

"She's hot, fellows; the real stuff! Old Kentucky Bourbon, and I know it."

"You're off there," said Crane; "it's Scotch."

"Well, they're just alike," said Flint, drawing his hand across his mouth. "Won't your old man git onto the fact that you swiped it?"

"That's my lookout. He left his office unlocked, so that anybody might have gone in if they wanted to, and he didn't see me get it. How's he to know?"

"By hemlock, he can't know; unless yeou get drunk, and he guesses it from that."

All took a drink from the bottle; and then, sitting down, with the bottle thrown on the hay behind them, the cards were shuffled by Bat Arnold, cut and dealt, and they began to play, slapping down the cards and talking loudly.

"I took that trick!" said Orson Oxx, as Bat Arnold began to draw to his side the cards that had been played.

Bat looked at the cards.

"So you did," he said, and passed the cards over.

"Naow no cheatin' in this game," urged Jube. "There won't be no fun in it, if any of yeou fellers go tew cheatin'."

Bat looked across at him, with a flush of anger.

"I didn't intend to try to cheat. But you'll find out, Jube, when you git out into the world, that it's cheating that does the work every time. I've looked around enough to know that."

"Who's goin' tew win—which side I mean—in the tournament?" Jube asked, slapping down a card.

"Our side, you bet!" Bat declared. "Whenever we've had a show, when the thing was fair, we've won."

"That bobsled race was fair, wa'n't it?"

"Not on your life it wasn't; that was the biggest swindle that ever came over the pike. Was it fair when Lightfoot steered his bob across the cut-off instead of following the road? You bet it wasn't! That was a rank swindle, and I've heard a good many say so. And that's one of the reasons that makes our fellows determined to do up the high-school crowd in the tournament."

"It'll be a good reason, if yew do 'em."

"You'll see that we'll do 'em."

"Yeou don't think that yeou could do up Lightfoot in a foot race, yeoursel?"

"By ginger, I could!" cried Crane. "Kirt wants to get the glory of that, or he'd have let me go in for it."

He ruled me off. Said my legs were too long, and couldn't run worth shucks. I'd like to know if the fellows with the longest legs don't have the best show in a race like that?"

"It's the fellow that picks his feet up fastest and puts 'em down quickest," said Oxx, slapping down a card.

Bat Arnold played, and again drew the cards toward him.

"Here—here, that trick's mine!" cried Flint.

They began to wrangle about this; and, as they did so, the hay behind them moved a little and a grimy hand appeared and pushed itself out, at the end of a tattered sleeve.

An unkempt, unshaven face came out of the hay, the bottle was lifted to the filthy lips, and more than half the contents disappeared.

The cork was thrust in quickly; the bottle was replaced on the hay; and face, sleeve and hand vanished.

By and by Flint remembered that he had declared himself to be a lover of "good red likker."

He reached out and drew the bottle toward him.

When he saw its condition he stared.

"Say, which one of you fellows has been swiggin' this on the sly?"

Another squabble took place, for every boy there declared his innocence.

Flint, after each had tasted the liquor again, put the bottle once more behind him.

The grimy hand came out, the cork was removed and the bottle was once more tilted over the red nose.

A minute or so later Flint again drew the bottle forward.

He had good cause now to stare.

"Say," he shouted in anger, "one of you fellows has been playing sneak! It was you, Wilson Crane, for you was nearest to it!"

All stared at the empty bottle.

"Crane, if you did, you're a sneak!" declared even

Arnold. "Maybe you think it's smart, to bring whisky out here to us and then down it yourself."

Wilson Crane protested his innocence vigorously."

"Well, what became of it, then?" Flint demanded.

"You was closer to it than me," said Wilson. "It was right behind you. You could get at it easier than I could."

"Could I drink it without you seeing me?"

"Well, could I, without you seeing me?"

"By hemlock, mebbe the bottles' got a hole in it!"

"Yes, it has—where the cork goes in!" Bat retorted.

Wilson rose to his feet.

"I ain't going to be insulted!" he cried. "I never touched that whisky bottle, except when Flint passed it round."

Jubal took the bottle, drew out the cork, thrust it in, then drew it out again, while his good-humored mouth spread in a grin.

"What's the use o' fussin'?" he said. "I know who swallowed the whisky?"

"Who did?" Flint demanded. "It wasn't me."

"By hemlock, the hay swallowed it!"

"The hay?"

Jubal slipped the cork in and out again.

"I'll swear to it, by gum! This cork ain't a good fit, and like's not, yeou didn't push it in hard, and when yeou put the bottle back there ontew the hay the liquor run aout. That's the hull secret of it. So, what's the use o' jowerin' abaout it?"

Wilson sat down, and took the bottle. He tried slipping the cork in and out, and the others did the same.

"It don't seem so very loose," said Bat.

"Well, if the hay didn't drink it, yeou tell me who did?"

This was a stumper.

"Nobody could bring that bottle up tew his face and make a drink while we was playin' without the rest of us seein' him."

It was so good an argument, and so convincing, that

they all grouped together; and again the card playing went on, with much talk about affairs in Cranford, the coming athletic tournament, and Jack Lightfoot and Phil Kirtland.

If to be talked about causes one's ears to burn, Jack's ears, and those of Phil Kirtland as well, must have burned like fire that afternoon.

Their personal history, their private affairs, the wealth of Phil Kirtland's parents, and many other things, were threshed over by "The Gang," as they sat there slapping down those painted pasteboards.

Burrowing under the hay, able to hear all, the tramp who had poured the whisky down his thirsty throat, listened with strange eagerness.

When the boys had left the barn, the unshorn face appeared again; the hay was pawed away by grimy hands, and the tramp drew himself out of the deep hole he had burrowed in the hay, and where he had lain in concealment throughout the card playing and the talk.

The whisky he had surreptitiously swallowed had warmed the cockles of his heart, made his face glow, and his head feel light.

He peeped through a crack in the barn, and saw the boys walking leisurely across the field.

"Hoopla!" he said. "That was as nigh ter havin' a distillery throwed at me as ever happened. Wisht they'd do it ag'in!"

Then he kicked and capered, and falling back on the hay waved his heels in the air.

Seeing the bottle, he picked it up and drained the few drops that remained in it, patted his stomach, and again lying back on the hay kicked his heels joyously.

CHAPTER III.

IN THE GYM.

The merry tattoo of a punching bag sounded from the gymnasium over the old carriage shop.

Mr. Norwell Strawn, by whose kindness the high-

school boys were permitted the free use of this floor, had presented them with a new punching bag, and the boys were finding the sport very fascinating, as well as a good developer of muscle.

Jack Lightfoot was coaching Lafe Lampton.

"Now try the left lead," he said. "Step forward with your left foot and hit straight out with your left hand, aiming for the center of the bag; hold your head slightly to the right, and your right forearm across your breast. Look out for the bag when it comes back at you."

Lafe did not look out closely enough, and the bag belted him in the side of the head, bringing a roar from the boys who were looking on.

Lafe grinned and rubbed his ear.

"Say, if that bag was a slugger it would be a good one! It hit me before I had time to think."

"If you were in a scrap with another fellow, that's what he'd be likely to do, wouldn't he?"

"Not if I urged him not to," said Lafe. "He wouldn't be a gentleman if he did. 'Tain't fair to hit so quick."

But he tried again, and this time avoided a counter from the bag.

Once he half missed, and at another time struck a slapping blow, and Jack Lightfoot corrected him.

"No, that isn't right," said Jack, at another time; "you struck at the bag in a downward direction. That shortens your reach, is likely to give a twinge to your elbow, and lessens the force of your blow. Hit straight out. And be careful that you don't miscalculate your distance and overbalance yourself. When you've delivered your blow, spring back quickly into position. Now, try it again."

Lafe Lampton, thus coached, tried it again, and yet again, until he could do the trick with fair satisfaction.

Having in a manner conquered the "left lead," Jack put him at practice on the "right lead."

"Face the bag just as you would an opponent," he

said, instructing in this, "and stand about the same distance from it that you would from an opponent. Then as you step in slightly with your left foot, strike out, and throw your whole weight into the blow. Duck your head to the left to keep from being hit by the bag when it comes back at you; then jump at once into position and do it over again."

Lafe practiced this a while.

"That's enough for to-night," said Jack. "You don't want to make yourself tired of it at the start, nor get your arms and shoulders sore. You've got to use those arms in the tournament."

"Howling mackerels," said Ned Skeen, "he isn't going to run with his arms!"

"If he runs, he'll be apt to swing them a little, won't he? And if his arms and shoulders are sore that will be sure to affect his running."

Ned Skeen thought he could "knock a hole" in the bag, or "belt the cover off the old thing."

So he tried his skill, and proved pretty good at it, as he was quick and light both with his feet and with his hands.

Yet he did not escape several severe jolts from the bag, as it came back with hammering force and swatted him in the face or on the head.

"If I could only work jiu-jitsu on this thing," said Nat Kimball, as he took his turn for a try. "Say, fellows, I don't know whether this kind of practice amounts to much after all! If you know jiu-jitsu you don't need this kind of thing; all you've got to do is to get the advantage of the fellow you're fighting with, and twist his arm quick and break it, or something like that, and then you've got him."

"I don't understand that we're bag punching just to put us in trim for slugging matches," remarked Bill Pomeroy. "My idea is that it's for development."

"Well, you need that, all right," Kimball retorted.

Of the Pomeroy brothers, Bill was not so well developed as his younger brother, Bob, the big, red-haired

giant of the club; he was shorter and slighter, with muscles that were somewhat flabby, while Bob's big arms and legs had muscles hard and tough as oak.

"The greatest objection that I find to jiu-jitsu," remarked Jack Lightfoot, thoughtfully, "is just there—just in the thing that Nat Kimball suggested."

"What's that?" Nat asked, as he took out a handkerchief and began to polish the bag with it, to remove any germs which it might have collected.

"It enables a man to take an unfair advantage; and that isn't according to the spirit of American fairness."

"Why isn't it? When you go into a fight, isn't it the idea to do up the other fellow, and do him up quick, in any way you can?"

"I don't think so. Even in fighting there is such a thing as fighting fair, and Americans have always been fair and honorable fighters. In jiu-jitsu, the knowledge of certain tricks will enable a man to break his opponent's arm, as you say, or even break his neck or his back; will sometimes enable him to kill him."

"That's all right for the weaker man, isn't it? He wouldn't have any show otherwise."

Nat Kimball was small himself, and he spoke with some warmth, when he thus referred to the weaker man.

"Yes, but a knowledge of jiu-jitsu isn't to be confined to the weaker men; it can't be. Ruffians and thugs will take advantage of it, as well as honest people; and you see what an advantage it will give them. Some of the things of jiu-jitsu are all right, I think, but other things in it lack the element of fair play entirely. And I'm in favor of fair play every time."

The boys applauded this.

Fair play was their watchword, in sports, in school, in everything.

"To get there—that's the thing!" said Kimball. "I'm in favor of anything that enables a fellow to get there."

"Would you apply that to everything?"

"You bet."

"Then, in business, any underhanded advantage you could take you'd use, would you, to enable you to beat the other fellow?"

"You bet—just to get there," said Nat, defiantly.

"You'd go as close to stealing as the law would let you? You'd cheat whenever you could, if you thought you wouldn't be found out?"

Nat Kimball paused.

"That isn't the same."

"It's mighty near it," Jack Lightfoot declared. "The whole secret of many of the tricks taught in jiu-jitsu is to enable you to take advantage—an unfair advantage. And that isn't saying that all of it is unfair."

Kimball, who was small and dark, with black eyes, and shining locks of hair that always appeared oiled, looked at Jack.

"Lightfoot, when you're fighting there's just one rule—do the other fellow up; and that applies to business, too. Do the other fellow up, and do him up quick, before he has a chance to do you."

Jack Lightfoot laughed at Kimball's seriousness.

"I mean it," said Kimball; and then, whirling, he struck the bag a vicious blow, as if he thought it an antagonist; and the bag, resenting it, came back with so strong a rebound that it cracked him on the nose and set the blood to running.

Kimball took out his handkerchief.

"Gnat," said Lafe Lampton, "you wiped all the germs off that bag into your handkerchief, and now if you mix 'em up with the blood and rub it round over your nose, you'll have cholera."

"Oh, shut up!" Kimball snapped. "You think you're smart."

The boys practiced other things that evening, as well as bag punching, and Kimball, who had taken up jiu-jitsu as a fad, and fancied he knew a good deal about it, gave some exhibitions of jiu-jitsu trick work.

In addition, there was some practice on the horizontal bar, club swinging, trapeze work and the like.

As the boys worked, laughed and joked, a hairy, trampish face appeared at one of the windows and peered in.

The tramp who had been hid under the hay in the old barn had made his way into the town and climbed to the roof of the shed of the carriage shop, which enabled him to reach the point where he now crouched.

He lay flat on his stomach, and stared in at the young fellows who were doing their gymnastic stunts.

He heard the talk about jiu-jitsu, and watched the tricks that Nat Kimball tried to show off.

"Wow!" he muttered. "Dat would be jes' de t'ing fer me. If I had dem tricks down fine, I'd like ter see de cop dat could pinch me an' lug me off to any ole jail. While he was tryin' it, I'd break 'im in two."

But thoughts of the advantages jiu-jitsu would be to him if he understood it were apparently not the only thoughts running riot in that trampish brain.

He studied the faces of the boys, and listened to the talk that went around.

He lay there until he saw that the boys were about to leave the gym for their homes, when he crawfished away from the window, and, reaching the edge of the shed roof, dropped to the ground, and disappeared.

CHAPTER IV.

ON THE CINDER TRACK.

Phil Kirtland came out to the cinder track the next day, where Jack and his friends were getting themselves in trim for the tournament.

Some of the members of the academy athletic club were with him.

"You fellows don't intend to hog this thing, do you?" he asked, somewhat curtly.

"Of course not," Jack answered. "Jump in and practice as much as you want to, and whenever you

want to. We might even have some preliminary races and other things between members of your team and mine."

Kirtland waved his hand airily.

"Well, Lightfoot, we think we can sprint a few. I didn't come down here to sprint, though, but simply to find out if you fellows are trying to hog the cinder track and keep it for yourselves. It's all right, if you do, of course; I don't doubt that your fellows need the practice."

He tried to speak humorously, but merely succeeded in being sarcastic.

His air of cool effrontery, his wiggling fingers, and the curve of his lip, brought up Jim Bright, one of the new members of the high-school athletic club.

"Kirtland," said Bright, straightening up and thumping himself on the chest, "I don't think you can sprint any."

He tiptoed and looked at Kirtland fiercely.

Jim Bright was a character. For one thing, he fancied that he had in him the making of a great actor; therefore he could never say or do anything without calculating its effect on an audience.

To him all the world was a stage, and he was the actor that trod the boards behind the footlights.

Kirtland merely laughed at him.

"Kirt," he said, again drawing himself up and thumping his bosom, "I myself can beat you at a foot race! If you don't believe it, try me."

"Go spout to the pump," said Kirtland, ironically.

"He refuses to race with me!" said Bright, oracularly, as if speaking to the air.

"Bright, you are a fool!"

"Kirtland, you are an ass!"

Bright thumped his chest and glared.

Kirtland wiggled his hand and laughed.

He turned from the actor, Jim Bright, to Jack Lightfoot, who was regarding him steadily.

In many ways Jack Lightfoot admired Phil Kirtland.

He had so far found him an honorable opponent.

Kirtland liked the huzzas of the cheering multitude, and was jealous, in a certain sense; yet his sense of personal honor was so high that he was not willing to take advantage of a rival, and he had tried to be fair to Jack.

Yet Kirtland had not been pleased when Jack defeated him in the bobsled race, though he had tried to hide his dissatisfaction under an air of simulated indifference, and had declared with much public spirit that he accepted the result of the race, and that it had been fairly run.

"Lightfoot, just for the fun of the thing, I'll try you on the cinder path this afternoon!"

He was anxious to know what Jack could do in a short dash.

The year before, Jack had run a race on that cinder path, and had won. It had been a race against a boy who was not now in the Cranford schools.

In that last year's tournament Kirtland had taken top hand, and Lightfoot's part had not been very conspicuous, beyond that one victory.

"I'd like to try you, just for fun," said Kirtland, and he began to take off his coat.

Lafe Lampton came up lazily, munching an apple.

"I'll be timekeeper," he announced, dragging out his watch.

"Thank you, Loaf; not any, you won't," said Kirtland. "I want a distinterested party to keep tab on this race."

Lafe dropped the watch back into his pocket.

"Think I'm a cheat, do you?"

But he was not angry.

"Lafayette, you're too honest, that's all. I want some fellow who will give me the advantage."

"But I haven't said that I'd race you," Jack interposed.

Kirtland looked at him sharply, and smiled.

"Ah, Jack, I knew you'd take water as soon as I appeared on the scene!" he declared, airily. "Why won't you race?"

"Well, I'm not in the best of trim to-day."

Jack spoke the truth.

He had not felt well since he had fallen in something resembling vertigo, as he was making his way to the lake to take part in some skating races.

At the time, many had believed he had fallen in a fit of intoxication; but this had been shown to be utterly false.

Nevertheless, Jack was preparing to take part in the races and other events of the coming tournament; not that he really wished to, but because, having decided to engage in the tournament, the members of his athletic team would have felt defeated before the start if he had not been willing to take a part and to lead them.

So he had braced up, put a bold face on the matter, and was resolved to do the best he could.

Yet the old enemy, which he had resolved to combat, a lack of confidence in his ability, had sorely troubled him, and troubled him now.

As always, this lack of confidence came in a new way.

He simply felt that he was not physically fit to take part in the tournament.

Kirtland picked up his coat.

"I knew that as soon as I appeared you'd go into a blue funk!"

Kirtland said this with a laugh, but his dark eyes glittered.

"My head has troubled me some, and I get dizzy now and then," Jack urged, after a moment of thought, in which he considered what effect this announcement might have on the members of his team.

Kirtland turned and jokingly struck Lafe Lampton a thumping blow on the chest.

"Lafayette, I'll race you!"

Jim Bright tiptoed to make himself taller, and smote himself a resounding blow on the lungs.

"Me lord, race me!"

"Bright, go fall on yourself!" said Kirtland.

"I'd rather fall on you," Bright declared, throwing himself into a pugilistic attitude.

"I'll race you!" said Jack, with sudden determination.

"Howling mackerels, that's the stuff!" cried Ned Skeen. "Now we'll see some fun."

Wilson Crane came up on his long legs and poked his long nose into the crowd.

"I'll run against any feller here," he proclaimed.

Kennedy, the night watchman, appeared at this juncture, and was unanimously chosen as timekeeper and referee.

Jack took off his coat and gave it to Lafe Lampton, who stood silently by, munching his apple.

"You can beat him, all right," said Lafe. "Remember the time you made yesterday."

Phil Kirtland had given his coat to Bat Arnold.

"I'll not start you with my pistol," said Kennedy.

"I'll just say 'Go!' after I've asked 'Are you ready?'"

The cinder path was in the best of condition, and the dash was to be two hundred yards.

Jack Lightfoot and Kirtland toed the line, each stooping forward and touching fingers to the ground.

"Are you ready?" Kennedy called.

An instant later he shouted, with the quickness of a shot:

"Go!"

Jack Lightfoot had crouched in a beautiful attitude for the start, his legs well under him, his knees as far as possible from the ground, his hands resting on the finger tips on the starting line and at each side of his body.

For himself and his team he had urged and practiced quick starting, in a race of this kind, and now, at the word, he got away with cleverness and spirit.

But as he shot down the cinder path, with his friends yelling for him, and the partisans of Phil Kirtland filling the air with their howls, he realized that the strength he had possessed but yesterday was not his to-day.

Though he gained a yard almost at the beginning, Kirtland came up and passed him, in spite of all he could do.

"Confidence!" Jack urged to himself, knowing that was his weak point.

He tried to quicken his speed.

The finish of the race was a beautiful one, with both boys straining to the utmost to breast the line first.

Kirtland accomplished the trick, beating Jack Lightfoot by a full yard.

As Jack came trotting back, he was pleased to see that his friends still cheered him.

As for Kirtland's adherents, they were fairly dancing their joy.

"Wasn't that all right?" Kirtland asked of him, as Jack took his coat from Lafe. "If you don't think so, I can do it again."

"Once is enough, thank you," Jack admitted.

His friends gathered about him.

"I think you slipped, about the middle of the race," said Ned Skeen. "If it hadn't been for that you'd have beat him."

"I didn't slip," said Jack, as he put on his coat.

"Well, he can't do that when the real race comes off," avowed Lampton, chewing at his apple.

"How much will you bet that I can't?" said Kirtland, who heard this. "Money talks!"

"Yes, when there's a fool with a big mouth behind it."

"Ah, Lafayette, you try to be funny, and you make a failure of it."

"It's my money that's sp'akin' sivinteen languages—Irish, English, American——"

Jerry Mulligan, the Irish cart driver, had arrived at the cinder path in time to see the finish of the race.

He drew out a wad of bills and shook them under Kirtland's nose."

"The whole av ut I'll bet ye, that whin the rale races come off, Jack Lightfoot beats ye to death!"

"I can't afford to bet with a millionaire like you," said Kirtland, laughing, for he was now in good humor, having beaten Lightfoot, a thing which made him almost sure that he could defeat him in the tournament races.

"A millynaire, is ut? I'm a car-rt dhriver. Don't insult me, av ye pl'ase; fer I ain't a millynaire, ner anny kin to wan. But there's me money, talkin' fer me in siventeen languages; and ut says that ye can have the whole av ut if ye bate Jack Lightfoot in the regular ra-ace."

"Go away, Mulligan."

"Ye won't bet?"

"It would be robbing you."

"Ut would? Thry ut! I'm wantin' to be robbed."

Jack Lightfoot was saying nothing.

But he was thinking.

"I'm not in trim for any athletic work, and I know; yet, if I say so to the boys, they'll lose courage."

He did not say so; but said, instead:

"Fellows, we'll try to give them all they want when the tournament is pulled off. To-day I didn't do it, but we weren't running for blood to-day."

"It's not necessary to put up money," said Kirtland, confidently, "but I can beat you whenever you want to run."

He stood before Jack.

"The only trouble, Lightfoot, is that if you're beaten, you'll put up the howl that your head wasn't right or it wouldn't have happened."

Jack flushed.

"That's your excuse to-day!"

"Did I say that to you?" Jack asked.

"No, but you said it to Lampton. As you came out to the ground, you complained that your head wasn't just right, he says."

Lafe threw down the remnant of his apple and stepped in front of Kirtland.

"Kirtland, you've twisted that; I didn't say it in the way you've put it, and if you say I did I'll see if I can't hammer your face in."

Kirtland laughed again contemptuously.

"Lafayette, I can't afford to fight with little boys like you; you might scratch my legs, and then I couldn't do up Lightfoot when the tournament comes off."

"Take back what you said. I didn't say it the way you claim."

"All right, Lafayette, anything to please you. I take it back."

His manner was jocular and airy, and there was a smile on his face.

He felt in his pocket and brought out a stick of candy.

This he gravely offered to Lafe Lampton. With an angry snarl, Lafe struck it to the ground.

"Am I a baby?"

"Well, I didn't know!" said Kirtland. "All you fellows are acting like babies. So I thought you might be pleased with the candy."

He turned away.

"Come," he said, taking Brodie Strawn by the arm, "these chaps are going to play the baby act on the day of the tournament, and I know it. They're at it already; and that shows they understand they're going to be beat."

CHAPTER V.

A STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE.

On the forenoon of the day fixed for the tournament, Jack Lightfoot set out for a brisk walk along one of

the valley roads, accompanied by Lafe Lampton and Nat Kimball.

There had been a sharp frost in the night, and the wind was cold off the lake; but the afternoon promised to be exceptionally good for outdoor athletic work, and not too cool for the comfort of the spectators.

The coming tournament had already excited much interest in the town of Cranford, and there was certain to be a large attendance.

Jack knew that many wagers had been laid on the various events; and was particularly aware of the fact that Jerry Mulligan, in the fever of his enthusiasm, had placed more money on the quarter-mile dash than he was able to lose.

"I'm sorry Jerry has made such heavy bets on my running to-day," he said, speaking to both Lafe and Nat.

"You're feeling all right, aren't you?" Lafe asked, somewhat uneasily.

"Yes, I'm in pretty good trim this morning."

Jack was indeed feeling better, and had more confidence in himself than at any time since the tournament had been projected.

"Well, then, Jerry's money is safe! Kirtland can't beat you, if you're in fit condition to run, and I know it."

"But it's taking big chances for one who isn't any better able to lose his money than Jerry," Jack objected. "I may not win. There's always a chance to lose."

In saying this, Jack was doing the very thing he had always warned the members of his team against—talking in a despondent tone, or a doubtful one, of matches and other events in which they were to take part.

He had uniformly argued that half the battle was a confident feeling of coming victory; and that to feel beforehand that the chances of success were not good was to invite defeat.

Lafe reminded him of this.

"You're right, Lafe," he acknowledged. "I take back what I said. Jerry oughtn't to have bet his money in that reckless way. I'll stand to that; but, at the same time, I'll certainly do my part to see that he wins his wager."

They took the road that led along the level ground of the valley, instead of climbing toward the slopes of Eagle Hill.

The valley road gave a view of the lake. It gave a view also of Eagle Hill on one hand, and across the lake of the great, thick woods that there stretched for many miles, with towering blue hills behind them as a background.

The scenery about Cranford was beautiful and picturesque.

The road crossed the railroad beyond the town; then it swung in a curve toward the rocky and wooded hills that lay on the south side of Cranford; one of these hills being Eagle Hill, the scene of the coasting and the bobsled race already mentioned.

Jack and his companions had no particular destination; but they continued on for some time, talking of the tournament.

Finally they entered the woods along the base of the timbered hills, and wandered about amid the trees and rocks.

They became separated, as they searched for early spring violets.

When Lafe Lampton called, only Nat Kimball came toward him.

"Where's Jack?" Lafe asked, but with no anxiety.

"He was right over there a while ago. I saw him as he poked along by those rocks."

"I think we'd better be going back," Lafe urged.

"Do you think you'll take part in the races?"

"No, I can't sprint, though I've been bluffing and trying to. I'll do some of the heavy stunts. You and

Skeen and Lightfoot will have to do the racing. I think you can do it all right."

They talked a while, and when Jack did not come, they moved in the direction in which Kimball said he had last noticed him.

Then, still not seeing Jack, they called to him.

They began to be worried when, having shouted together several times, they received no answer.

Lafe Lampton funneled his hands.

"Coo-ee!" he called, making a sound that rang far through the wooded and rocky hills.

They stood still and listened.

"This is awfully queer!" said Lafe. "Something's happened to him. You know that trouble he had with his head? He may have tumbled down again, and can't help himself."

Alarmed, they began a more systematic search, looking everywhere closely, half expecting to behold him lying prostrate.

As they made this search, they repeated their calls.

"He couldn't have got lost," said Kimball.

"Of course not. He knows this woods well enough, ought to. He has lived all his life in Cranford, and has been over these hills and through these woods hundreds of times. He's dropped down somewhere with aigo again, I tell you."

For a full hour they searched for Jack Lightfoot; becoming frightened by his mysterious disappearance when they failed to discover any sign or trace of him.

"We'll have to hurry back to town and get help," said Lafe, at last.

He was thoroughly worn out, and Kimball was not much better condition.

"Yes, that's what we'll have to do."

"I know something has happened to him," Lafe declared, almost tearfully. "But it's strange we can't find him, even if he has tumbled down. He may be dead, you know!"

Reluctantly they turned from the rocky and tim-

bered hills, and taking the road by which they had come, they hastened almost in a panic back to the town.

The first person they met was Bat Arnold.

He stared incredulously, as they told their remarkable story.

"You expect me to believe that?" he asked.

"Believe it or not, it's the truth!" Lafe declared.

"Why should we be lying about it?"

Bat looked wise and flicked at his cigarette.

"Lafe, I may seem green, but I'm not so green as I look. Is there any reason, do you think, why Jack Lightfoot would want to lose himself now out in those hills? Answer me that."

"There isn't, and you know it."

"I know it, do I? I know that he'd like to get out of that race. Since Kirtland beat him so dead easy in that practice sprint he isn't anxious. I knew he wouldn't be. I guess he'll hide out till the thing is over, and then come in and report that he was lost."

Lafe Lampton looked at Bat savagely for a moment, and seemed on the point of striking him. Then Lafe's mood changed.

"Bat, you're too silly for anything! Run on about your own affairs, and I'll see if I can't find some one in Cranford who won't think I'm a confounded jackass."

"Hope you'll succeed," said Bat, as he moved on. "But remember, if your men don't toe the scratch this afternoon the tournament contests will fall our way. You know that. We'll be there, every fellow of us; and paste that in your hat!"

Lafe Lampton walked on angrily.

"The puppy!" said Kimball. "Does he think Jack Lightfoot would do such a thing?"

Suddenly Lafe stopped in his tracks and looked at Kimball.

"Gnat, you don't suppose this could be the work of that academy crowd?"

"How?" asked Nat, in amazement.

"They're afraid of Jack, for all their bluffing and bragging. They know that he's not only our leader, and that we're likely to go to pieces if he isn't with us, but that he's the best sprinter we've got. You don't suppose they could have kidnaped him, or hired some one to do it for them?"

Nat Kimball's dark face flushed red at the thought.

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Nor I, till this minute."

"Do you suppose they would do such a thing?"

"Those fellows would do anything."

"Kirtland wouldn't."

"I'm not so sure of that. And he mightn't know anything about it. Some of the others may be into it. There are a lot of mean whelps in that academy crowd."

"Oh, they wouldn't do that!" Nat protested.

"Well, then, why couldn't we find him, when we looked everywhere? If he had fallen down we ought to have run across him."

"That's so; we did make a thorough search."

"We'll make another; and if we can't find him then I'll be sure that this is a game of that academy gang. They're equal to it. And they're afraid of him."

"It would give our chance of winning a pretty hard jolt, if they should cut him out of the tournament in that way."

"It would ruin it," said Lafe, savagely.

Going on into the town, they told their startling story to the first persons they encountered; and soon a crowd was streaming along the road toward the timbered hills, talking excitedly of the mysterious disappearance of Jack Lightfoot.

Jerry Mulligan joined this crowd, with his cart, after hearing the report that Bat Arnold was spreading.

"Av anny wan says to me that he's made a shneak to git out av that race I'll smash his face fur him!" Jerry threatened.

Guided by Nat and Lafe, the crowd went to the place where Jack had last been seen.

There Jerry tied up his horse and became one of the leaders in the search that now ensued.

As Lafe and Nat hurried along with Jerry, all three anxious and excited, they made a strange and inexplicable find.

It was a page of penciled writing, in Jack Lightfoot's familiar hand, and was sticking in the top of a low bush, where it could not fail to be seen by anyone coming that way.

Thus it read:

"DEAR LAFE: I am all right. Don't try to find me. Go back to town, and you and the other fellows do everything you can to win in the tournament. I will explain later."

There was no name signed to this; but Lafe and Nat both knew Jack Lightfoot's writing too well to doubt that he had written it.

"Well, now, what do you think of that?" Lafe asked, gasping with amazement.

"I can't understand it," said Nat, who was equally astonished.

"Ut's too quare fer me intoirely," Jerry admitted. "Ar-re ye sure 'twas him writ ut?"

"Dead sure!" said Lafe.

"I guess there can't be any doubt about it," added Nat, staring stupidly at the writing.

Lafe looked round, with staring eyes.

"Maybe he's just playing a joke on us, and wants to see how we'll take it!"

"Ut's a poor joke!" said Jerry, indignantly.

Lafe called loudly, making the woods ring with the name of Jack Lightfoot.

Several of the searchers came running toward them.

One of these was Phil Kirtland, who had joined earnestly in the search.

Lafe hesitated, when he saw Kirtland; but the hesitation passed, and he extended the paper to him.

Kirtland read it with a whistle of surprise.

Then he, too, looked around.

"What do you think of it?" Lafe asked, uneasily.

Others were hurrying up, to ascertain the nature of the discovery that had been made.

"Well, it seems to me," said Kirtland, slowly, "that this is pretty good proof of what Bat Arnold charged—that Jack is playing a game of hide-out, just to get out of that quarter-mile dash with me this afternoon. He'll come in, after the tournament is over, with some smooth story to account for his disappearance and why he wrote this note; and, of course, a lot of you fellows will be fools enough to believe him. As for me, I'm through with this search. I don't intend to be made a jackass of even by Lightfoot."

"You couldn't be," said Lafe, angrily. "You're one already!"

The search stopped right there, for many of the people. But others continued it, among them Lafe Lampton, Nat Kimball and Jerry Mulligan, who declared there was something mysterious back of that penciled communication, and they intended to find out what it was.

But their searching was in vain.

Jack Lightfoot could not be found, nor any further trace of him.

CHAPTER VI.

ON THE ATHLETIC FIELD.

Lafe Lampton and Jerry Mulligan remained in the woods, prosecuting their search, still believing that something strange and inexplicable lay back of that singular communication from Jack Lightfoot.

Nat Kimball, and the other members of the high-school athletic team, who had taken part in the hunt, went back to Cranford; and most of the people who had been in the woods did the same.

The feeling was growing that Jack Lightfoot would turn up all right after the tournament.

Those who held this opinion were divided into two factions.

One faction believed, with Bat Arnold, that Jack was playing what they called a game of hide-out, because he feared to meet Kirtland in the quarter-mile dash that afternoon; and that he would appear in due season, uninjured, with a plausible lie ready-made to account for all that had happened.

The others stood ready to charge the whole thing to certain members of the academy team.

This faction claimed that the academy boys wanted Jack to be kept away from the tournament, hoping his absence would cause the high-school team to go to pieces and fail to win anything.

Jack's closest friends did not accept even this.

They believed, with Jerry and Lafe, that there was something mysterious back of it.

Yet they were resolving to obey the order Jack had so strangely sent, and were pulling themselves together for the purpose of winning all the tournament events they could, leaving the future to clear up the mystery of this queer occurrence.

As Lafe would not return to take part in the tournament, in which he was expected to do some "strong man" feats of lifting and hammer throwing, Orson Oxx was pressed into service in his place.

Though Oxx belonged to "The Gang," with whom Bat Arnold and Wilson Crane trained, he was a student at the high school, when he went to school at all, and therefore was eligible to a place on Jack's team, and could be put in as a substitute.

Nat Kimball was chosen leader, in Lightfoot's place; and, thus reorganized, the team went out to the athletic field in the old fair grounds on the edge of the town, prepared to do the best they could to uphold the high-school banner.

The singular disappearance of Jack Lightfoot seemed to have added to the general interest in the tournament, judging by the way the people came out.

When the team arrived at the fair-ground entrances they found a great crowd streaming through the gates and seeking seats.

The sky was blue, and the wind slightly cool, almost too cool for good work on the cinder track and in the athletic field, but as fine a day as could be expected for the time of year.

The members of the high-school team were undeniably nervous.

"Fellows," said Nat, "take a brace!"

"I feel more like takin' a drink!" Orson Oxx admitted, as he bobbed his round body up and down on his thick legs to keep himself warm.

He took up the hammer; and, in swinging and dragging it round, threw dirt over Nat's nice new uniform, on the breast of which appeared the letters H S.

It was not policy for Nat to get mad, for he was now the captain; so he took out his handkerchief, daintily wiped away the earthy stains, and admonished Oxx to be more careful in the future.

"This ground is full of germs," he urged. "Keep them off of me, please."

Kirtland and his team came onto the grounds, in their handsome new uniforms, looking spick and span and fit for anything. On their breasts showed the letters C A, meaning Cranford Academy.

"I never saw so blue a crowd!" declared Kirtland, as he looked at the high-school team. "Why don't you fellows brighten up a little?"

"Howling mackerels, we can't!" Ned Skeen confessed. "If we knew what's happened to Jack, we'd feel better."

"We captured him, and are holding him out in the woods," said Kirtland, jocularly. "We were afraid of him."

"I'm ready to believe it!" cried Nat Kimball.

"Sure thing! That's what we did, fellows. Jack's such a wonder that we knew we couldn't do anything if he was here, so we put him out by kidnaping him.

There's Constable Kennedy. Why don't you have him arrest us for it?"

Orson Oxx stretched out his fat arms and yawned.

"Oh, say, if we only had some beer!"

"Why didn't you bring some out in a paper bag?" asked Kirtland, airily.

"In a paper bag? Why, how——"

"It hasn't leaked out yet!"

He wiggled his hand, as he said it.

"That's just a little joke, Orson, but you're too much of an Oxx to see it."

Orson struck at him.

"One strike!" said Kirtland. "You missed, slick as a whistle."

"Oh, you make me tired! You feel so stuck up and swell."

"That's right; before I came down here I swallowed a bottle of glue and an yeast cake. I feel all stuck up, and I'll swell for a week, at least. But where's Lightfoot, the boy of the light foot, you know? He must feel light-headed, to let us capture him and hold him out in the woods the way we're doing."

Kirtland was in high spirits. He saw that the boys of the high school were depressed, and he felt confident of victory.

While Kirtland was chaffing, the preliminaries were being arranged by the officials in charge.

A few minutes later six trim young fellows lined up for the one-hundred-yard dash, at the far end of the brown, level track.

The people were still streaming through the gates, but the crowd was already well seated.

As the representatives of the high school and the academy thus stepped into position, a roar of applause broke forth.

Apparently the disappearance of Jack Lightfoot was already forgotten.

But there were some, many, in fact, who were thinking of Jack, in addition to the mother who was watch-

ing and waiting anxiously in her home for some news of him, and the members of his athletic team, who were made nervous and uneasy by his continued absence.

Yes, the contests had begun; and Jack Lightfoot—where was he?

The starter stepped into position behind the runners, so that his movements and the flash of his pistol could not be seen by them.

There was a crouching of tense legs, a swaying of white arms, a sharp revolver shot, and away the runners bounded, their feet pounding the cinder track with drumlike reverberations.

The people stood up, yelling.

But Jack Lightfoot?

CHAPTER VII.

JACK LIGHTFOOT'S EXPERIENCES.

It seems well to investigate at this point the question of what had befallen Jack Lightfoot.

He had separated in the woods from his friends, Nat Kimball and Lafe Lampton, as the three looked for early spring violets.

Walking along with head down and eyes bent on the ground, while making this search, Jack heard a sound near him.

Before he could turn, a man darted from behind a rock, and the folds of a dirty blanket fell over Jack's head, smothering the startled cry that rose to his lips.

Though Jack struggled lustily to free himself, he was so hampered and choked by the blanket that he could do nothing.

Alarmed as well as indignant, not knowing who had attacked him nor why, he fought until he could fight no longer.

He knew dimly that more than one person was contending with him. He heard no voices, but did hear the thumping of more than one pair of feet.

Then he was caught up, still enveloped in the blanket,

and carried hastily some distance, being finally dumped down.

He tried to struggle again; but some one sat on his head, a method so effectual that Jack was quickly reduced to unconsciousness.

When he recovered he found himself in a thicket he knew well, far up the side of the timbered hill, and a long distance from the road.

Four men stood about him, all of them tramps. One leveled a revolver at him.

"Kid," said this one, "take a new think. We ain't goin' ter hurt ye—not any; but we're goin' ter keep youse a while. Some o' yer friends air down dere huntin' fer youse, see! We ain't anxious ter have 'em find yer. Now, so's dey won't, we'll ask youse to do some writin'."

One of the men had produced a leaf from a notebook, and a bit of lead pencil.

"I refuse to write!" said Jack, defiantly. "Release me and let me go."

He was justly indignant.

The man with the revolver laughed.

"We don't like ter work fer nuttin'. It was work ter ketch youse and bring youse up here. You'll write dat paper—see!"

"What are you holding me for?"

"Fer dough—see! Your gov'nor has got wads of it. We want him to divide wit' us."

Jack stared.

"No need ter make a bluff," said the man, in a threatening tone. "We've looked into dis biz all right. Your name's Kirtland, and your gov'nor has got more green dan he knows wot ter do wit'. We want some o' it, an' dis is how we're ter git it—see? We holds youse till he's ready ter cough up."

Jack Lightfoot was for a moment bewildered.

Then he thought he understood the situation.

These tramps had kidnaped him in the belief that he was Phil Kirtland, and were intending to hold him

until Kirtland's father was willing to pay a big sum for ransom.

"You never made a worse mistake in your life," he declared. "My name is not Kirtland. If you're holding me to get money out of Mr. Kirtland you're on the wrong track. He isn't my father."

His apparent sincerity might have convinced other men, but these hoboos were so accustomed to telling lies themselves that this was the thing they had expected.

"Dat's all right," said the man with the revolver. "We ain't askin' any fer yer private hist'ry. Jist write down wot we says, an' we'll git it ter de right place. You're at de head o' yer at'letic team, and youse was seen in dat posish. Now write wot we say."

Jack refused again.

He could not see through the dense screen of the thicket in which he was held; nevertheless, if he had not been threatened with death he would have shouted to the friends he was sure were searching for him.

"Wot's de reason you won't write it?" demanded the angry ruffian who held the revolver.

This was said after Jack had been dragged still further away from the point where he had been missed by Lafe and Nat.

In the meantime, Jack had done some thinking.

"What do you want me to say?" he asked now, craftily.

"You'll write wot we says fer youse to or youse stays up here in de woods dead—see!"

From the talk of the tramps Jack knew that the searchers were returning, after having gone to the town.

From the high hillside the tramps could see the town, the valley and the lake, and the highways leading to various points.

"What do you want me to write?" Jack asked again.

"Write a note to yer gov'nor, tellin' him dat youse air all right—see! Tell him dat some coves is holdin'

you, an' intend to cut yer t'roat if he don't come down to de limit wid his dust. Say ter him dat he kin leave his wad o' green, fi' t'ousand dollars, in a bag at de foot of de tree dat stands in front of de ole hay barn in de field sout' of town. You know where dat is?"

Jack admitted that he was well acquainted with the location of the old hay barn.

"Tell him dat if he tries any tricks yer t'roat will be cut—see! We ain't takin' no risks. If he puts cops out by dat barn, or tries to nab us in any odder way, it settles youse. We wants nuttin' but dough. If it ain't fort'comin, why——"

He made a squeaking sound, and drew his hand across his throat significantly.

"Now, youse knows wot ter write."

Jack took the pencil and the paper, and after a moment of thought penciled a letter to Mr. Kirtland, in which he wrote as if he were addressing his father.

When he had incorporated the things desired by the tramps he passed the writing over.

They stood together scanning what he had written, but at the same time he saw that they were watching him, and the man with the revolver held the weapon ready for use.

"Dat's all right; but youse didn't sign yer name."

Jack had hesitated to do that.

"I didn't think of it; he'll know my handwriting."

But the tramps were not satisfied.

They handed the paper and pencil back to him.

"Sign it," he was ordered.

Jack thought again, tapping the paper with the pencil.

"See here," he said, looking up, "you fellows are making awful guys of yourselves; this man isn't my father, and he won't put up any money for me."

They grinned at what they considered his apparent subterfuge.

"Den who air ye?" the leader asked, though he was prepared beforehand and not to believe the reply.

"My name is Lightfoot."

"Wow! dat's a good 'un!"

The fellow who made this exclamation turned to the others.

"Dat's right; dey calls him Lightfoot because he's a sprinter. He was goin' ter run in de races ter-day. I heard 'em talkin' dat over while I was roostin' on de roof o' dat shed and peekin' t'rough der winder."

"Put yer name onter dat paper," the leader commanded, gruffly. "We're gittin' tired—see. And let it be yer right name, too. No Lightfoot biz in dis. If yer gov'nor don't cough up, youse ain't goin' ter take part in any more races never. So dat race-horse name won't do youse any good."

Jack was still thinking; and, as he thought, he attached to the paper the name of Phil Kirtland, wondering at the same time if in so doing he was approaching to the borderland of the forger.

One of the tramps, climbing to the top of a rock, dropped down again with a queer squeak.

"Wow! dey're comin' fer anudder look round."

This stirred Jack.

He knew that the hour for the races was fast approaching. He saw, too, that unless he was uncommonly lucky he would not be able to take part in them. He knew that the receipt of that letter by Phil Kirtland's father would be regarded strangely. He wanted to do something, but for a moment did not know what.

"We're got ter take him funder," said one of the tramps.

What seemed an inspiration came to Jack.

"Are those fellows boys who are looking for me down there?"

The tramp took another look.

"More'n one is a boy, and some of 'em air men. Wot you want?"

Jack felt sure the tramps would not let these searchers find him. Yet he wanted to communicate with them.

"Let me write a note to them—a note that will send them back to town," he urged.

The tramps stared.

"Wot'll youse write? Somethin' tellin' 'em to come on?"

"No, no; I'll not. I'll tell them to go back to town."

"Let's see you write dat note."

The man who had the old notebook in his pocket tore out a sheet, and on it Jack hastily scribbled the message which later Lafe Lampton and Jerry Sullivan found sticking in the top of the bush, where one of the tramps had left it as Jack was hurried away from the dangerous vicinity.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE PAINTED CAVE.

Wilson Crane was coming toward Cranford along the road that led over the eastern shoulder of Eagle Hill.

It was a poor road, full of holes and choked with rocks, and he was not making good progress, though he was in his father's buggy and driving his father's best horse.

The thing that especially vexed him was that he felt sure he would be late at the tournament.

He was to take part in one of the sprinting matches, and believed firmly that his long legs would carry him to victory.

At the final moment, feeling the need of strengthening his running team, Kirtland had agreed to put Crane in.

After that Crane's cup of joy was full, until his father ordered him to take some medicines and other things to a patient who lived on a rocky farm to the eastward of Eagle Hill.

There was one thing Dr. Miles Crane would not tolerate, and that was disobedience of direct orders.

So Wilson had to go; and he was now returning, in a very ill temper indeed, for he found it hard to get any speed out of the horse on that rocky highway, where the recently melted snow added to the natural difficulties.

"Pap forgets that he was ever a boy and liked to run races and play ball and other things!" he was grumbling. "Gad-up there!"

He cracked the horse over the back with a switch he had cut from the roadside.

Suddenly Wilson heard a muffled voice off at one side of the road.

"By gum, what was that?" he exclaimed.

Though he was in such a hurry, he drew rein and sat listening.

"It came from the Painted Cave, I bet!" he whispered, while his big eyes rounded. "There was a queer feller roamin' round up here. Some said he was crazy, but I don't believe it."

It occurred to Wilson that it would be a feather in his cap if he could, on his return to town, be able to report that he had caught a glimpse of the "Wild Man," whose presence in the woods had more than once been reported during the past month.

"It wouldn't be fun, though, if he should jump out o' the cave and grab me!"

The temptation to investigate was so strong that he climbed softly out of the buggy, and as softly tied his horse, using a slipknot, so that he could release the animal instantly if he so desired.

"If he chases me I can git to the buggy first, and then I guess there ain't much danger that he can catch me."

With this thought Wilson Crane slipped in the direction of the underground retreat, called by the Cranford people the Painted Cave.

It opened in the hillside, and its location was shown

by three big Lombardy poplars, which stood in a row and marked the site of a house that had long since disappeared. The Painted Cave was on an abandoned farm.

In the summer time parties of young people came up to the cave from the town, and picnicked under the poplars.

They formed exploring parties, which penetrated sometimes far into the winding passages.

How far into the hill the cave extended hardly anyone knew; though it had been sufficiently explored to show that it contained nothing remarkable, with the exception of the highly colored rocks that formed the entrance. These were banded and streaked in all the hues of the rainbow, and gave to the cave its name.

Wilson Crane had been many times to the Painted Cave, and knew the way so well that he was able to creep along the dim path under the trees and up to the painted portal without making a sound.

At intervals, as he passed along, he listened, and once thought he heard a groan. At another time he heard some one talking.

The sound thrilled him to his finger tips.

Wilson was inclined to be romantic.

To behold with his own eyes the "Wild Man" sitting within the cave entrance, talking to himself, inspired him with more than ordinary courage.

He was sure now that the "Wild Man" must be there.

"If I can get one look at him I'll skedaddle, and he won't know anybody's been within miles of him."

He reached the mouth of the cave, and getting down on his hands and knees crept to the edge of the ledgy rock which formed, as it were, a sort of door-slab to the entrance.

As he did so, he felt himself caught with a viselike grip by the collar, and was jerked forward into the darkness so violently that he was rendered breathless.

Then a match flared and the stub of a lighted candle threw its flame in his face.

This was followed by a roaring laugh.

"Wow! it's de runner fer de distillery!"

Wilson was so stunned he hardly knew what to think, when he saw before him four tramps, and behind them, sitting against the wall, Jack Lightfoot.

"Hello!" said Jack, trying to look pleasant. "Sorry you tumbled into this trap. But that gentleman's hand over my mouth kept me from warning you."

"We'll see wot he's got wit' him."

The tramp who had been hidden in the hay, and had there guzzled Wilson Crane's stolen whisky, made a dive into Wilson's pockets.

All he brought up was a box of pills, a small knife, and a package of cigarettes, with some matches.

"Well, dese air good!" he said.

Taking one of the cigarettes he lighted it at the flame of the candle, and dropped the matches and knife into his pockets.

The box of cigarettes he passed to his companions.

"Hold 'im, while I go out an' see wot he's got in de hearse."

He slid out of the cave and made his way to the buggy.

When he came back he had a bottle of alcohol, one of camphor, and a small bottle of brandy.

"Whoop!" he gurgled as he showed his "find." "I said ter youse dis was de agent of de distillery. He's always got de goods wit' him."

"How did you get here?" Wilson asked, staring at Jack and trembling.

Jack nodded toward the tramps grouped about the prizes which the doctor's buggy had yielded. The sight of those bottles made him uneasy. If the tramps should become intoxicated his position might be exceedingly perilous.

"They captured me, and brought me here."

Taking council of caution, one of the tramps left

the cave, and conducted the horse and buggy from the roadside into the shelter of the trees, where he tied the animal again.

"We may want to ride away from dis place in dat coach," he said, chuckling joyously, when he came back. "It'd be wort' two hundred plunks, if we could sell dat rig anywheres."

"Five hundred," said Wilson, almost indignantly. "That ain't any old crow-bait of a horse."

Though he said this with spirit, he was still confused and trembling.

He had not been tied, and he saw that Jack was not, either; but their chances of getting away were poor, just the same.

The tramps guarded the entrance, and one of them at least had a revolver, which he did not hesitate to display with many grins.

"Nobody else comin'?" the leader of the tramps asked.

The answer was in the negative.

They began to sample the stuff in the bottles.

The brandy went first, and after that they tried the alcohol, with a pull now and then at the bottle of camphor, whose principal ingredient was alcohol.

How they could pour the fiery stuff down their throats was more than Jack Lightfoot or Wilson Crane understood, but down it went, as if it were water.

One of them looked hungrily at the box of pills taken from Wilson, as if he thought seriously of swallowing that.

"Any pizen in dese?" he asked.

"I don't know," Wilson answered; and was then sorry he had not said something to urge the tramps to swallow the pills, for he recalled that he had heard his father say they contained an opiate.

"They've got candy in 'em, and you'd better try 'em!"

But his anxiety to have them try the pills was too apparent now.

"They'll be drunker'n fools, if they keep on," he whispered to Jack, as he saw them sucking at the bottles.

"It may give us a chance to get away. I wish I knew what time it is."

Wilson had taken a look at the sun, as he drove along, when near the cave.

"It's about time for that tournament to begin," he grumbled, "and I'm down for one of the races. Pap had no business to send me on this trip to-day. Now, see what's come of it!"

"Shut dat hole in yer face!" shouted one of the tramps, lifting an empty bottle as if he meant to hurl it at Wilson's head.

Wilson ducked, and expected to hear the bottle crash against the stone; but it did not leave the hand of the tramp, who laughed with a coarse gurgle when he saw the boy dodge.

"Next time I'll sure t'row it!" he threatened.

Neither of the boys spoke for a while after that.

"Say, do youse b'long down dere, too?" one of the tramps finally asked of Wilson.

"Down in the town you mean? Yes."

"Dat feller says his name ain't Kirtland; dat it's——"

Jack turned anxiously to the speaker, wondering what would be the result when Wilson revealed to these men the truth.

"Ah, saw dat off!" the tramp leader howled at him.

Jack looked puzzled, for Wilson had not had a chance to answer.

"Ah! didn't I see youse tech him on de leg wit' yer foot?"

"Of course his name isn't Kirtland," said Wilson, positively, his words showing his surprise; "what made you think so?"

The tramp leader winked knowingly, and leered, as he put down the camphor bottle.

"It's Lightfoot, ain't it?"

"Sure thing!" said Wilson.

"Dat's what I t'ought you'd whisper, after he give youse de hunch!"

Jack's hopes fell with a thud.

Wilson was becoming even more alarmed than he had been at first. His face was almost blue, and his teeth were chattering.

"If you'll let me go, I'll——"

"Send us a wad, eh? All right, we'll do dat? We'll git word down ter de town ter-night about youse, same's as we've already done fer him. Den youse can bote go, when de long green comes—see!"

He again put the camphor bottle to his lips.

"Dis stuff would warm a feller up in a snowdrift. Got any more down t' your house?"

"Plenty of it," said Wilson.

"Youse keeps a distillery, I guess!"

"Of course not; my father's a doctor."

"Next door ter a distillery, a doctor's shop is; I'd like ter live in one."

He took another pull at the fiery camphor, and coughed.

"Chee! dat's tobasco fer ye! But it's good!"

Another of the tramps reached for the bottle and set it to his lips.

"Do you fellows think Jack's name is Kirtland?" Wilson ventured to ask.

"Sure t'ing! We knows it."

"Well, it isn't!"

"Dat's what youse say, an' what he says; but we knows what we knows. His gov'nor will cough up de dough fer him, all right; or, if he don't——"

He made a squeaking sound, and drew his hand suggestively across his throat.

Wilson shuddered.

One of the tramps turned to him.

"Dis is even a better hidin' place dan dat hay, an' youse has come along wit' some more bottles; I calls dat great luck!"

Wilson did not understand him.

"Up in de hay, ye know; I was layin' dere, in a hole, wit' me nose stickin' out, when you an' de odder swell guys comes in ter play cards an' wet yer t'roats. All o' youse t'ought de whisky bottle pulled its own cork and leaked inter de hay. It leaked inter de hay all right; leaked inter me—in de hay! See?"

He took another try at the camphor bottle, while Wilson looked confused.

"Ter-night we'll send dat word ter yer gov'nor. If he coughs, ter-morrer youse goes free. We'll cut out o' dis in dat buggy, hit de railroad, and den—good-by! Oh, you cert'inly has been good ter me!"

He tipped the bottle and took another swig of the burning camphor.

Jack Lightfoot began to feel that with the coming of Wilson Crane and those bottles his condition had been made perilous in the extreme; and this feeling was augmented when two of the tramps, rising within the entrance of the cave, began to jig about in an attempt at a crazy dance, slapping and cuffing at each other, as the alcohol mounted to their heavy brains.

"'Possum up de 'simmon tree,
Raccoon on de groun';
Says de raccoon to de 'possum,
'Shake dem 'simmons down!'"

Thus sang the first.

"Wow!" squalled the second; "I'm a hobo frum Hoboken!" and, beginning to pat his legs, he squealed in a thick, drunken voice:

"Farmer on de haystack,
Hobo on de groun';
Says de farmer ter de hobo:
'Come sling dis hoss-feed down!'
'Excuse me,' says de hobo,
'Fer I don't like ter work!'
'You ain' no count,' says de farmer,
'Yer allus wants ter shirk!'
So de hobo hits de high road,
An' rambles all aroun',
A-huntin' fer some farmer,
Who'll t'row his own hay down."

The third hobo jumped to his feet and joined in the wild dance, while the fourth, tapping with his foot and slapping his hands together, kept time for them.

It was an exhibition which would have been interesting and highly amusing to the boy prisoners, if their conditions had been different.

CHAPTER IX.

AGAIN THE ATHLETIC FIELD.

Again at the far end of the cinder path there was a swaying of white arms, a momentary crouching of tense legs, a sharp revolver shot, followed by the pounding of the feet of the sprinters.

The spectators were yelling in their excitement.

Everywhere people were standing up to see better, girls were waving their new spring parasols, and their handkerchiefs, and men and boys were swinging their hats.

Seemingly Jack Lightfoot had been forgotten.

Lafe Lampton was still away, with Jerry Mulligan and some others, searching the timber hills a long distance from the Painted Cave.

Nat Kimball, anxious and nervous for Jack's safety and for the proper conduct of the high-school athletic team, of which he was temporary leader, was flying round, shouting orders and begging the high-school boys to give a good account of themselves in the events now on.

Among the girls were Nellie Conner and Kate Strawn.

They had seats in a good position—the athletic boys had seen to that—and they were watching the sprinters; but every few moments their heads turned toward the road taken by the searchers for Jack Lightfoot, and it was plain that thoughts of Jack, and fears for his safety as well, concerned them much more than the things happening on the cinder track.

"Oh, for Jack Lightfoot!" thought Kate Strawn, as she saw Ben Henderson, of the academy team, forge to the front in the race now being run, and breast the tape a good yard in advance of all the others.

The academy boys were showing themselves fine

sprinters, and were "putting it all over the high-school fellows," as Bat Arnold boasted.

But there was a gap in the academy team which was felt.

Tom Lightfoot, Jack's cousin, was not there, and he was one of the best runners and all-round men the team had.

After a talk with Jack's mother, Tom Lightfoot had set out for the timbered hills, and was making a hunt on his own account, accompanied by some of the village boys who were admirers of Jack Lightfoot and sufficiently interested in his fate to be willing to make this search, even though it lost to them the pleasure of witnessing the tournament.

Saul Messenger came out on the circular half-mile racing track, accompanied by Nate Silingsby. Saul represented the high-school team and Silingsby the academy.

Saul Messenger was sallow-faced, with thick, lumpish shoulders, a protruding jaw and yellow hair. It was said of Saul that he loved to fight quite as well as his father, Dr. Silas Messenger, loved race horses.

Nate Silingsby, the representative of the academy, was a different style of boy entirely, with thick, chestnut-colored hair, hazel eyes, and a not unhandsome face. But he, too, was a fighter; or had that reputation among the members of his club and his fellow students of the academy.

It was plain, when they appeared on the track, ready to compete for the half-mile event, that Silingsby was the favorite.

He received an ovation which made his hazel eyes sparkle.

He wore no hat—neither of the runners did—and he tossed his chestnut mane, and waved his hand to his admirers, as he got into position for the start with Messenger.

"Don't crowd me!" Messenger grunted, rather angered by that burst of applause for Silingsby.

He pushed Silingsby over into his place.

"Oh, you know I'll beat you," said Silingsby, with a sneer, "and that makes you mad!"

Crack!

What might have been more than an angry dispute was ended by the report of the starter's pistol.

The high-school supporters whooped for Messenger, and their opponents yelled to Silingsby, as the two boys got away together, running well side by side for the first quarter.

At the end of the first quarter Messenger picked up a little, and forged ahead by a few inches.

"Howling mackerels, see the sinner run!" shouted Ned Skeen, pleased, and dancing in excitement.

Messenger was indeed doing well.

When Silingsby heard those yells of the high-school adherents, and the bellowing of his own friends urging him "to come home," he pulled all his energies together.

He crawled up to Messenger, and again they were running side by side, with the half-mile circle nearing its end.

As they came with a rush toward the grand stand, in that final burst, the people stood up again, shrieking with excitement.

"Come home!" screamed Ned Skeen, hammering his hands together. Come home! Come home, you wild man! Whoop! Come! come! come!"

The sympathizers of the academy team were equally good at howling, and in commanding their representative to "come home," and he was responding in a beautiful way.

The thud of drumming feet became more distinct, as, with arms swinging, heads well up, their faces set and determined, the sprinters raced for the line.

Messenger threw the last ounce of his strength into the finish. He drew up and passed Silingsby, who was, and had been for some time, doing his best; and

he would have won—but, three yards from the line he stumbled!

Before he could gather himself again, Silingsby breasted the tape, and was the winner.

Three out of the five events so far pulled off had gone to the academy team.

Saul Messenger was furious. His tangle of yellow hair seemed a whirl of yellow flame, as, with his gray eyes burning, he leaped at Nate Silingsby.

"You scoundrel, you tripped me!" he screamed, and struck at Silingsby's face.

Silingsby warded off the blow, and struck back; and in an instant they were mixing in a fight in front of the grand stand.

Some of the women and girls leaped up, screaming; and several men jumped from their seats to the ground.

"Here, here; none o' that!" yelled Nat Kimball.

Kennedy pushed in, separated the fighting boys, and sternly threatened to send them to the lockup.

"The only thing the matter with you," flashed Silingsby, "is that I beat you fair and square, and you can't stand it to be beat."

There would have been another mix-up, but for Bob Brewster, the red-headed giant of the high school, who took Messenger in his strong arms, carried him out to one side and pitched him down on the ground.

"Stay there, you bulldog," he said, with a grin. "This is an athletic tournament, not a slugging match."

Bob Brewster was pitted against Brodie Strawn in the weight-lifting contest, and he acquitted himself creditably; so signally defeating Brodie that he pulled up the score of points of the high-school team, and gave their chances a more roseate glow.

Then Orson Oxx waddled out, to meet Connie Lynch, the big Irish boy of the academy team, and show to the world of Cranford that he was a better man than Connie in the art of hammer throwing.

Connie stepped first into the seven-foot circle from which the hammer was to be hurled.

He was a red-faced, blue-eyed Irish lad, and made a handsome appearance, in his neat, well-set uniform, with his bare white arms showing.

"Look out now," some one yelled, "Connie's going to throw it over the grand stand!"

Connie looked in the direction of the voice and kissed his hand.

"Ye're the darlint of me heart!" he cried. "Whin I throw it, you ketch fer me, to kape it from smashin' the benches."

"Oh, dear, I wish Jack Lightfoot were here!" Kate Strawn was saying, craning her neck toward the road where Lafe and the other searchers had disappeared. "The quarter-mile dash comes soon, and Kirtland will be sure to get it."

"That ought to please you," said Nell Conner. "Your brother Brodie is on Kirtland's team."

"Well it doesn't, just the same!"

"I'm not caring so much whether Jack wins the race or not; I should be satisfied if I just knew he was all right."

Jack Lightfoot was also the subject of the talk down in the athletic field, where Phil Kirtland was declaring his belief that Jack had planned to stay away, knowing that he had no hope of winning.

Kirtland was trying to make himself and others believe this.

All eyes were now fixed on Connie Lynch, who had lifted the hammer, and was swinging it round for the throw.

He let it go; and when the tape was applied a shout went up from the academy boys; for the tape showed the throw as eighty-five feet, which was pretty good for a boy of Connie's years.

Orson Oxx came into the seven-foot ring, with his hand laid on his chest and his round shoulders braced back.

Some of those looking at him said he resembled a baseball rolling into the ring; but Orson did not hear them. He was blissfully self-conscious, and also strongly confident.

"Oh, if I only had some beer!" he murmured.

"It would be the worst thing you could have," said Nat Kimball, severely. "It would make you weak, and it's got germs in it, anyhow."

"Beer always makes me strong."

"Yes, I guess that's right," Ned Skeen declared, dryly. "The only time I knew you to get your fill of beer I saw you trying to hold a house up."

"'Twasn't a house," said Orson; "'twas a lamp-post."

He took up the hammer, lifting it with a quick flip from the ground, to exhibit his strength.

Perhaps one reason why Orson Oxx was so strong was that he never exhausted his strength in doing work when he could help it.

"Now, slam it out good!" urged Nat Kimball.

"See me!" said Orson, smiling.

He swung the hammer round—once, twice, it whirled about him—then flew out.

The yell that rose seemed to shake the grand stand; for it was seen at once that for a boy, who was supposed to have had little training, Orson Oxx had made a throw that was a wonder.

It came pretty near striking the century mark; for, when the tape was applied, it measured up ninety-six feet and eight inches.

Orson laid his hand on his heart, or where he supposed his heart to be, though he misplaced the distance by a couple of inches, and made a most elaborate bow in the direction of the grand stand, as he had seen strong men do after executing their feats in a vaudeville house in the city.

It was as much as to say:

"Ladies and gentlemen, that was pretty hot stuff; but it wasn't the real tobasco, for I can do better."

Bowing again most elaborately, he stepped out of the big ring.

Bob Brewster, the good-humored, who never had an envious thought, patted him on the back.

"Good boy! good boy!" said Bob. "That fetches our score right up. Now, if Jack Lightfoot could hop in and win a few for us we'd still make those academy howlers look awfully sick."

Nat Kimball was to try the quarter-mile against Phil Kirtland, taking the place of Jack Lightfoot; and, though Nat was lively as a flea, none of his friends, and not even Nat, really expected that he could defeat Kirtland, who was noted as a fast runner.

"Oh, we're gone up, I guess!" said Ned Skeen, hopping about in his nervousness like a toad on a hot frying pan. "If Lightfoot was only here!"

Nat Kimball stripped down for the race, discarding the heavy outer coat he had been wearing; and Phil Kirtland did the same.

"Oh, if Jack were only here!" sighed pretty Nellie Conner.

"You thought it wasn't nice for me to say that a while ago," Kate Strawn reminded her. "But I'm wishing so, too."

"Fellows," began Nat Kimball, "here's where——"

"We get it in the neck!" interrupted Ned Skeen.

"Can you do better than I can?" Nat asked, sharply.

"If you can you're welcome to try."

Phil Kirtland walked toward his position, waving his hand airily toward the friends who were shouting to him their encouragement and applause.

"Your captain is still playing hide-out," he said to Kimball; "but I'd as soon defeat you as the next one, if you haven't any better material. You fellows might have borrowed some of our sprinters to-day, since Lightfoot went back on you."

"Is that right—is that fair?" protested Kimball, hotly.

"Well, you know what I think! Lightfoot was

afraid to meet me to-day, and planned to drop out, and then come back and account for his disappearance. I'm not the only one who says so. Half the people in this crowd are sure of it."

"When he comes back, we'll see!" said Kimball.

"Oh, we'll see! Yes, we'll hear—the lie he tells!"

"Where is Wilson Crane?" Kimball retorted.

"We're not charging dirt because he isn't here."

"Because you know why he isn't here. His father sent him out into the county, and he hasn't had time to get back. And we're another good man out—Tom Lightfoot, who, because he's Jack's cousin, is bound to believe that something has happened to him, and is wasting his time hunting for him. But that's all right, Gnat! You're standing in Jack's shoes now, and I'm here to show you that the part you ought to take is in a walking match—you can't run!"

"Get ready!" called Kennedy, the starter. "The quarter-mile dash is now to be run!"

It was the event on the winning of which Jack Lightfoot had set his heart, and he was not present to make even a try at it.

There was an interruption. A buggy driven at rapid speed came dashing up to the entrance.

Some one shouted that Jack Lightfoot had arrived.

Kennedy stepped back from the cinder path, anxious to see what this meant; and the runners, Kirtland and Kimball, deserted their places for the same purpose. Some of the people who were standing streamed now toward the gate, where the buggy had been drawn up.

There was a minute of intense and whirling excitement.

Then a voice yelled.

"False alarm!"

The buggy came through the gateway, with the people falling back before it.

To his surprise, Phil Kirtland saw his own father sitting in the buggy.

Mr. Kirtland seemed much excited.

"Is my son here?" he cried.

Phil Kirtland moved toward him.

"Ah! there you are!" cried Mr. Kirtland, when he saw him. "Thank Heaven for that!"

"The old gent seems to have lost his head!" Ned Skeen whispered. "What's he up to?"

Ned was suspicious of anything that it seemed to him might be a "game" or a "scheme" to favor the academy boys.

Mr. Kirtland flourished a dirty sheet of paper, apparently torn from an old notebook.

"I received this a while ago," he said. "I don't know how it came to me, but it was found thrust under the front door of my house. I admit it frightened me, and I don't understand it."

Then, for the benefit of the people who stood near enough to hear, he read the strange, threatening letter, demanding money, which had been written by Jack Lightfoot at the command of the tramps.

"I'm sure I don't understand it!" said Mr. Kirtland. "It seems to be in a boy's handwriting!"

He passed it round.

Phil Kirtland and some of his friends, and also some of the high-school boys, got a look at it.

They saw the vertical writing.

"Howling mackerels!" cried Ned Skeen. "That was written by Jack Lightfoot. I know his handwriting as well as I do my own."

"But it's signed Philip Kirtland," said one of the spectators.

"It was written by Jack!" Ned shouted.

"What does it mean?" was the cry that passed from mouth to mouth.

Phil Kirtland curled his lips in a sneer.

"Fellows," he said, "that's just another of Jack's tricks. I don't know what it means, nor what he expected to accomplish by it. It looks like the work of some one gone crazy. But I'll bet something hand-

some that when he turns up he'll be able to account for it all right."

"Do you hear what they're saying?" Nellie Conner whispered, for she had been able to hear much of what was going on, and had heard the letter, as Mr. Kirtland read it in a loud voice.

"Yes," Kate answered, "I hear some fool down there saying that Jack must have gone crazy and is out of his head, caused probably by the blow he received that time, which gave him vertigo. I know better!"

Altogether, the furore created by that letter was something strange to see.

CHAPTER X.

THE DASH FOR LIBERTY.

"When I was in St. Louie,
A gal wid yaller hair
Says: 'W'y do you stare at me so hard?'
Says I: 'I'm seein' de Fair!'
She hit me den wit' a meat ax;
Oh, she was offul fly!
I says: 'I didn't meat ax of you—
What I axed fer was a pie!'"

The tramps in the cave were still dancing and singing, growing more hilarious as the strong alcohol mounted steadily to their heads.

"Oh, chee, I ain't had so much fun sense de last time I was pinched!" one of them exclaimed, as he stopped for a moment or two in his shuffling. "Did I tell youse what happened ter me der las' time I come t'rough Ohio?"

The others continued their shuffling, except the man who was stamping his feet and clapping his hands to keep the time.

"Oh, saw off till I tells dis! I was comin' t'rough Ohio, an' as I piked along de road I see a gal standin' on a cow's back pickin' cherries out of a tree. I axed her wot was she standin' dat way fer, an' she says: 'I seen youse a-comin', an' I'm a cow-ard!'"

He stopped for the applause he expected.

"Den I axed her ter give me a bite o' cherry. She

said she wouldn't, but she'd give me a bite o' dog. De dog come fer me, an' I traveled. De only way I could run fer safety was roun' de house, an' I hit dat gravel walk hard, wit' de dog right after me, reachin' up ter tickle me below de s'penders. We went roun' dat house twice, an' I was gittin' a pain in me lung, when de door flew open an' de ole woman sailed out inter de yard.

"She says: 'What can I do fer youse?' And I answers: 'Youse can open de gate when I comes round nex' time, an' let me out.'"

"Oh, cheese it, I've heerd dat before!"

"Well, you didn't dis one, an' it's de trut'."

"You couldn't tell de trut', if you'd try!"

"Hear dis, an call me a liar!"

"I went up ter a house, an' says I ter de lady: 'Kin youse gimme a breakfast?' Says she: 'Wot air youse doing?'" "Travelin'," says I. Den she says: 'Jes' keep on travelin'!"

"An' dat makes me recklect dat I once struck a hayseed, and hollered ter him, as he stood in his door and I stood outside in de dark. 'I'd like ter stop here all night,' I says; and he says, back: 'Well, you've got my permission to do so; stop right dere. Nobody will trouble you!' Oh, wouldn't dat take de ague—cake?"

"Nodder time I struck a house and says ter de lady, 'Please ter give me a cold bite!' She stepped back, and gives me a piece of ice frum de cooler. Oh, wouldn't dat chill ye!"

"This will warm you!" a youthful voice shouted, and a section of red sandstone from the hand of Jack Lightfoot struck the hilarious joker in the stomach and doubled him up like a piece of rubber.

Jack Lightfoot had been waiting his chance, and he thought it had come, while the attention of the tramps was distracted by their jovial efforts at self-amusement.

He had communicated his intention to Wilson

Crane by a few significant signs, and Wilson, as it chanced, was in a mood to make the effort with him.

The dancing and laughing stopped, as the tramp tumbled to the floor, and Jack and Wilson jumped for the cavern entrance, footing it hot for the outside.

The tramp with the revolver, which he had kept by his side, and because of that had fancied he was ready for these young fellows, whirled unsteadily on his tipsy legs, and pointed the weapon waveringly at the flying figures.

As he did so, he pulled the trigger, and the roar of the weapon sounded like a cannon explosion in that confined space.

Wilson Crane dropped to his knees with a low cry, which went to Jack Lightfoot's heart like a knife stab.

He stopped and dropped at Wilson's side, determined to stand by him and defend him to the last.

"It's all right," Wilson whispered, beginning to scramble up; "I just slipped and stumbled down there."

"Cut for it!" said Jack, catching Wilson by the hand.

The revolver roared again, and the bullet came singing close to their ears as they scampered through the rainbow-colored portals of the cave into the outer air.

A terrible hubbub could be heard in the cave, a vile compound of howls and blasphemy, as the tramps began to realize what had happened.

"This way," said Wilson, turning toward the road.

Jack caught him by the hand again.

"No, you heard that tramp say he had changed the position of your horse and put him out here in front of the cave somewhere."

In his excitement Wilson Crane had forgotten that, but it had not been forgotten by Jack.

From the mouth of the cave came howls, with more oaths and muffled cries of rage.

Then the tramps scrambled into view, reeling and swearing, and tried to start in pursuit.

"They can't catch us; they're too drunk," Wilson urged.

"But a bullet from that revolver might, if they get too close. We haven't found the horse yet."

A moment later, as they ran on, they saw the horse and the buggy.

Bang!

The revolver of the armed tramp roared again, and the bullet cut through the tree boughs over the horse's head, as Jack Lightfoot, with trembling fingers, tried to untie the halter strap.

His knife had been taken from him by the tramps, so that he could not cut the strap; and Wilson's knife had shared a like fate.

But the strap noose slipped and fell away, as the tramps drew close enough to become a serious menace again.

"Stop!" the leader shouted, firing.

But he lurched so much, heaving and pitching along like a ship in a heavy sea, that he could not have put a shot into a barn at even that short range.

The bullet, flying wide to one side, chipped a splinter from a ledge of granite, and ricocheted with a wild, whirring whistle that rang strangely through the woods.

Wilson fairly flung himself into the buggy. Jack, who had untied the halter strap, reached the vehicle with a bound, as the horse started. Wilson dragged him in, at the same time catching up the lines.

In another moment the buggy was bouncing along between the trees, thumping its wheels against the rocks, and seeming in danger of being dashed to pieces, as the fugitives made this wild flight.

Wilson was trying to keep a cool head, though he was greatly excited.

Yet he turned toward the road, and was a good-enough driver to clear the obstructions that threatened to make shipwreck of this flying voyage at the very start.

Behind them, their voices grown fainter, bellowed and barked the outraged tramps, who felt that they were being cheated in a most wicked manner, just when they were having the time of their lives.

Likely it did not occur to them just then that the "beverages" they had secured from the doctor's buggy were at bottom responsible for this escape of the boys.

And still their rage and their howlings rose, as they saw the buggy flying toward the road with the youngsters, by holding whom they had expected to line their pockets with an abundant supply of long green.

Wilson looked at the sun, giving a quick upward glance, as the horse struck the road, where the traveling was better, though still far from good.

"I guess we're too late!" he said.

"For the tournament?"

"Yes."

But he lashed his horse with the lines, his switch having disappeared, and the buggy rolled on, hopping over the ruts and stones as if it knew now the need of haste and was resolved to be a good and obedient buggy for once.

The road, bad as it was, was so good compared with the trackless route taken through the midst of the trees and the rocks that it seemed now to Wilson to partake of all the beauties of a macadamized highway, though he had not so long before bemoaned the dire fate that made it necessary for him to travel over it.

"You're doing well!" said Jack, as Wilson slapped heavily with the lines. "We'll get into Cranford in time, at least, to hear who won in the tournament."

"It's as near to flying as this buggy ever did," said Wilson, still hammering the horse, which was tearing along at a gallop. "We've left the tramps, anyhow!"

"I don't suppose we could get to the field in time to take part in any of the events?" Jack asked, anxiously.

"I'd like to; I'm on the academy side!"

Then something of the humor of the situation came to Wilson Crane.

His horse and buggy were being used to carry toward that athletic field the one person whom he knew Phil Kirtland would prefer not to see there; the one person who stood any chance whatever of defeating Kirtland in that much-talked-of quarter-mile dash.

"Kirt won't like it, I guess, if we do get there in too big a hurry—with you!"

He smiled, thrust out his long nose and long neck, and again slatted the galloping horse with the lines.

"But—that's all right," he stammered, as the jolting buggy caught his breath away. "Kirt put me on the team, and I'm thankful for it; but what good is it going to do me if I can't get there to run my race? And if I get there——"

"I hope to be with you!"

Jack Lightfoot was smiling, not only at the quaint earnestness of Wilson Crane, but in sheer joy and gladness.

He had escaped from the tramps who had held him so long, and would not only be able to appear on the athletic field to make an explanation, but to ease the undoubted anxiety of his mother; and to Jack that last was the most important of all.

"Go-lang!" Wilson shouted, as he slatted with the lines. "We're having a preliminary race—in a buggy—racin' against time! Go-lang! Gad-up, there, you crow-bait! Go-lang!"

And the doctor's horse went along, with a speed that satisfied even the excited mind of Wilson Crane.

CHAPTER XI.

WINNING THE QUARTER-MILE DASH.

While the crowd on the athletic field was still gathered round Mr. Kirtland's buggy, asking questions and filling the air with comment, another and louder outcry sounded.

It rose into a yell, as the people on the upper seats of the grand stand sprang up en masse and began to cheer.

Then a name was heard, ringing out in that outburst of sound:

"Jack Lightfoot!"

Nellie Conner and Kate Strawn were standing up, waving their handkerchiefs.

Phil Kirtland looked about, startled.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Jack Lightfoot!" some one screamed, making a dash toward the gate.

A buggy came up to the gate, with the sweating horse at a dead run.

In the buggy sat Wilson and Jack.

The old fair grounds which held the athletic field lay near the lake; and on his way to it, Jack had stopped long enough at home to tell his mother what had befallen him and to slip into his athletic uniform; and he looked now, as he sprang out of the buggy at the entrance, as if he had been waiting only for the time to come when he could enter the event for which he had prepared so thoroughly by much practice.

If the crowd had roared when the buggy came into view bearing Jack Lightfoot and Wilson Crane, the sound of the cheering seemed to increase tenfold as the handsome boy made his way into the grounds and out toward the field, with dozens of hands stretching out to grasp him, as he passed along.

Wilson, having surrendered the steaming horse to the care of a friend, trotted at Jack's side, bobbing his small head at the end of his long neck, and smiling with great approval on this wild applause, which he thought was meant for him quite as much as for Jack.

"This let's me out," said Nat Kimball, in a tone of extreme gratification.

He shouted to Lightfoot:

"Good boy, Jack! I was going to make that dash for you, but you're just in time!"

There was no time for explanations, though people were still crowding about Jack, anxious to hear his story, desirous of congratulating him, and straining to take him by the hand.

Kirtland returned to his position on the track, with a strange look on his face. He was not pleased.

"You ought to go on the stage, Lightfoot!" he shouted.

"Why?" Jack asked, smiling at him.

"You're a born actor. You must have planned that to capture the crowd. The fools aren't all dead yet."

"They won't be, till you go under!" Nat Kimball flung back at him.

The starter stepped into position.

The people were settling back in their places, though on the ground the crowd was still squirming and moving with the restlessness of hiving bees.

Jack Lightfoot never felt more fit and trim for any work cut out for him than at that moment.

"That was a trick!" said Kirtland, as he waited, with Jack, for the starter's pistol.

"Nothing of the kind!" declared Wilson Crane, who heard the words. "I know all about it."

"Ah! gone over to the enemy, Wilson?"

"Not any; but I know about that, you bet! I'll tell you about it later."

The crowd yelled lustily.

Kennedy's revolver spurted its flame, and roared.

The runners flung themselves forward, and the much-discussed quarter-mile dash between Jack Lightfoot and Phil Kirtland, leaders of their respective athletic teams, was on.

Kirtland held his own well down to the eighth-of-a-mile post.

Jack Lightfoot was running easily, without any great apparent exertion.

Then he showed such a burst of speed that even those who had expected him to do well were more than gratified.

No runner of the Olympian races ever came toward the tape with more grace, and, as for speed, Kirtland, who had been counted by many there the best short distance sprinter ever seen in Cranford, began to fall a bit behind.

As he saw this Kirtland pulled himself together.

There was no question but that Phil could run.

For a time he held Jack to that one place, neither gaining nor losing.

The people rose to their feet again, cheering wildly, as the two runners neared the end of the dash.

Kirtland was now gaining!

A great cheering went up.

Phil Kirtland, stung by the fear of defeat, had set himself to do or die.

He had been more than a yard behind.

He decreased this; he drew up until there was but half a yard separating him from Jack Lightfoot.

Then there was seen something that made the people howl.

Jack Lightfoot drew away from Kirtland again.

The tape was at hand.

Once more Kirtland, throwing all his strength and will into it, seemed to come on faster, and ran neck and neck with his rival.

Then there was a wild roar from the frenzied crowd, when Lightfoot, by that last magnificent burst of speed, forged well to the front, and flashed over the line a scant yard to the good, winning the race.

Kennedy yelled, when the timekeepers gave the time, fifty-two and one-half seconds, for Jack had

beaten the official record of high-school running at that distance.

The winning of that race so advanced the points given to the high-school team, that, though they had not much to spare when the count was made, they were the victors, after all, in the tournament.

The explanations which Jack Lightfoot made concerning his strange disappearance could not be anything but satisfactory to everyone, even to Phil Kirtland, when they were supported, as they were, by Wilson Crane, of the academy team.

"Wilson," said Jack, when it was all over, "I think I must thank you for that. There are some fools in this town who would still have said that I tried to play a game of sneak, and, repenting of it at the last minute, decided to come in any try for that dash. It's lucky the tramps got hold of you, too."

"And lucky that we got away from them. I wonder where they are now?"

Which was a question that scores of people of Cranford tried to settle, by making a hunt for them.

But the hoboos, seeing that they had lost the game for which they had played, had hurried out of the neighborhood, and were not seen again.

THE END.

Next week's issue, No. 5, will be "Jack Lightfoot in the Woods; or, Taking the Hermit Trout of Simm's Hole." This is a rattling good story of fishing and out-door life, filled with lively incidents. There is a bit of mystery in it, too; a mystery which every reader will want to have solved. How it was solved and the many interesting things that befell Jack Lightfoot and his friends are set forth in a bright and attractive way in this story. You will want to read it. Be sure to get the next number.

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